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by

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Room with a View

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Room with a View

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my family and the students of New Orleans' Priestley Charter High School.

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Abstract

Room with a View

Adam Zachary Crosson, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Amy Hautt

My practice traces across urban formalism and the peripheral dissolve where each condition becomes recognized in the other. The results are photographs, sculptures, and installations referencing uncanny instances of time and place. In these conditions my works formulate place as vestige, where a sense of vernacular is gathered through distance and longing, as from the passing train or the bird's-eye view overhead.

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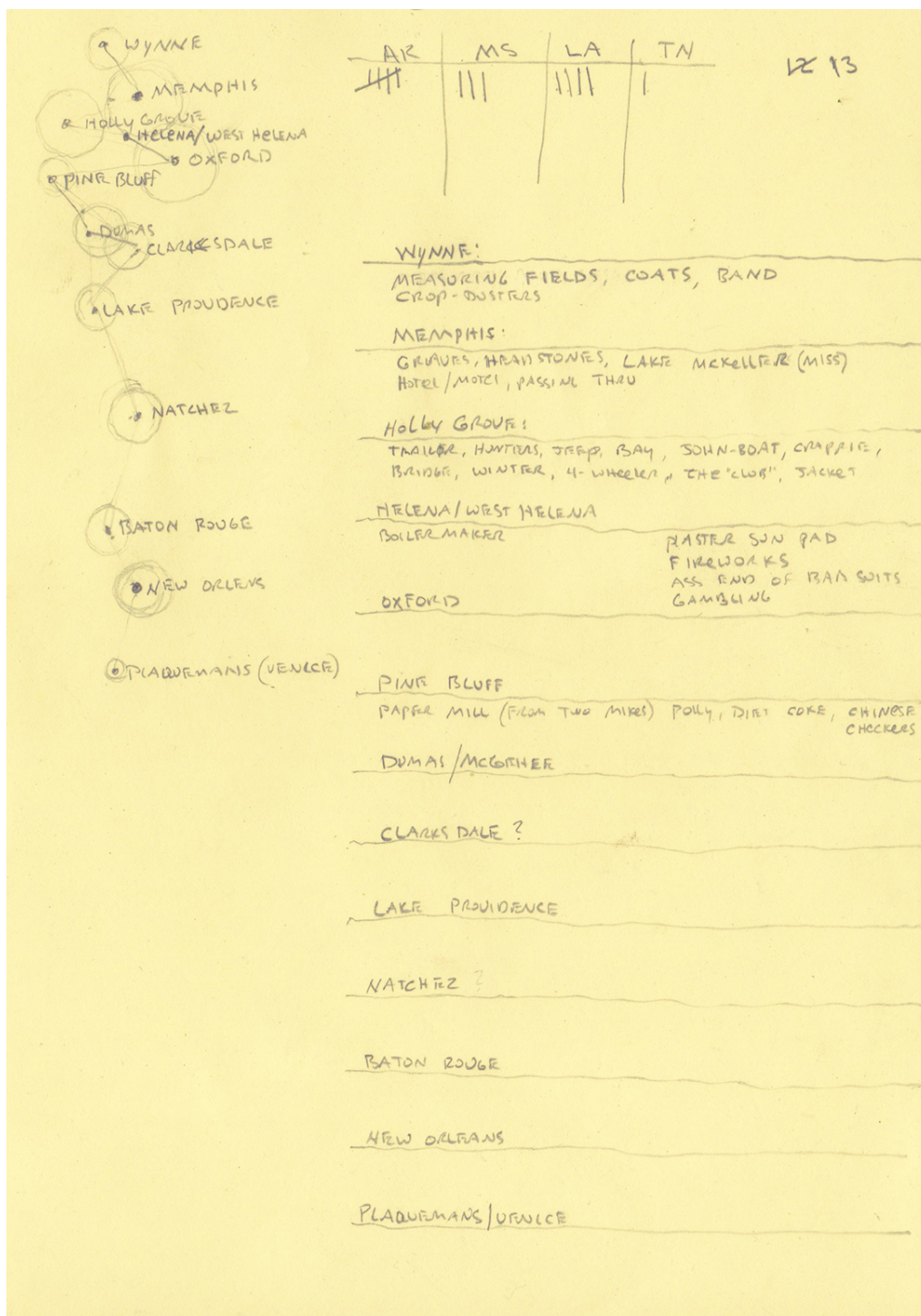


Figure 1. *Untitled (From Memphis to New Orleans)*, graphite on paper, 8.5"x4.25", 2015

"It was more like sketchy directions hastily scrawled at a gas station on a long road trip, a combination of random landmarks, personal notations, and guesswork."

Britt Salvesen, New Topographics¹

Illuminating the interior of its own empty carcass, this room-in-waiting perches, with heft, over a stubby palm, a spindly wooden fence, and a used Oldsmobile. My eye catches the dozen or so bare fluorescent bulbs glowing in the dusky sky. How strange.

The room *in waiting* is an empty sign-structure anchored into an abutment of gravel and pavement. *In waiting* because soon I will convert this empty space into a functioning camera as I have done with a selection of other empty sign-structures.

This desire, or compulsion, to convert a nonfunctioning sign-structure into a camera arises out of a complex of interests and influences. Having grown up in the predominantly rural state of Arkansas I witnessed many examples of agrarian structures in states of ruin. Barns, silos, chicken houses, and the post-industrial grain elevators at the Mississippi River's edge all impressed upon me, throughout my formative years, a lexicon of form and condition.

These forms and conditions would later reappear when I studied architecture. I read about Le Corbusier's own interest in the function-driven forms of his Swiss landscape. For me the most legible quality of those forms were their condition—the ruin.

As I gained autonomy and began to travel in my late-teens, the more time I spent away the more I became disillusioned with what I had known as home. At that age home seemed to be a container for ennui from which I ran before knowing its name. When I eventually returned, I began to realize that the ruinous figures on my

¹

Salvesen, Britt. *New Topographics*. Chicago: Steidl & Partners, 2010.

Southern landscape seemed to be quiet metaphors for an inevitable decay of the present. They were subtle representations of commerce gone awry, of folks packing their belongings for greener pastures of the American West—as I would do.

Rebecca Solnit discusses America's "amnesiac landscape" as one of erasure, razing the structures of our history as means of escape and control. I use my work as a tool to investigate the American ruin, an endangered species as Solnit describes². In a nation of erasures it is necessary to detect emerging conditions of the ruin as structures that are calibrated with America's amnesiac tendencies. I found respite in these aging and defunct structures, in their particular manifestations of entropy. The fact that they weren't razed told me more about their physical circumstance and their relationship to place. These were early harbingers of my current practice.

These days, I regularly travel the region from Memphis to New Orleans. In the work *Untitled (from Memphis to New Orleans)*, I've sketched a map of places along a meandering journey winding up and down the Mississippi River's own meandering path. (Figure 1) I have identified places along the routes, as destinations or points of interest. These are places in the sober sense of the word but I know them as dissolving conditions caught up in the entropy of my own memory and that of familial surrogates' from which I've gleaned identities and associations pertaining to these places.

²

Solnit, Rebecca. "The Ruins of Memory." *RUINS Documents of Contemporary Art*. Ed. Dillon, Brian. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011. 150-152. Print

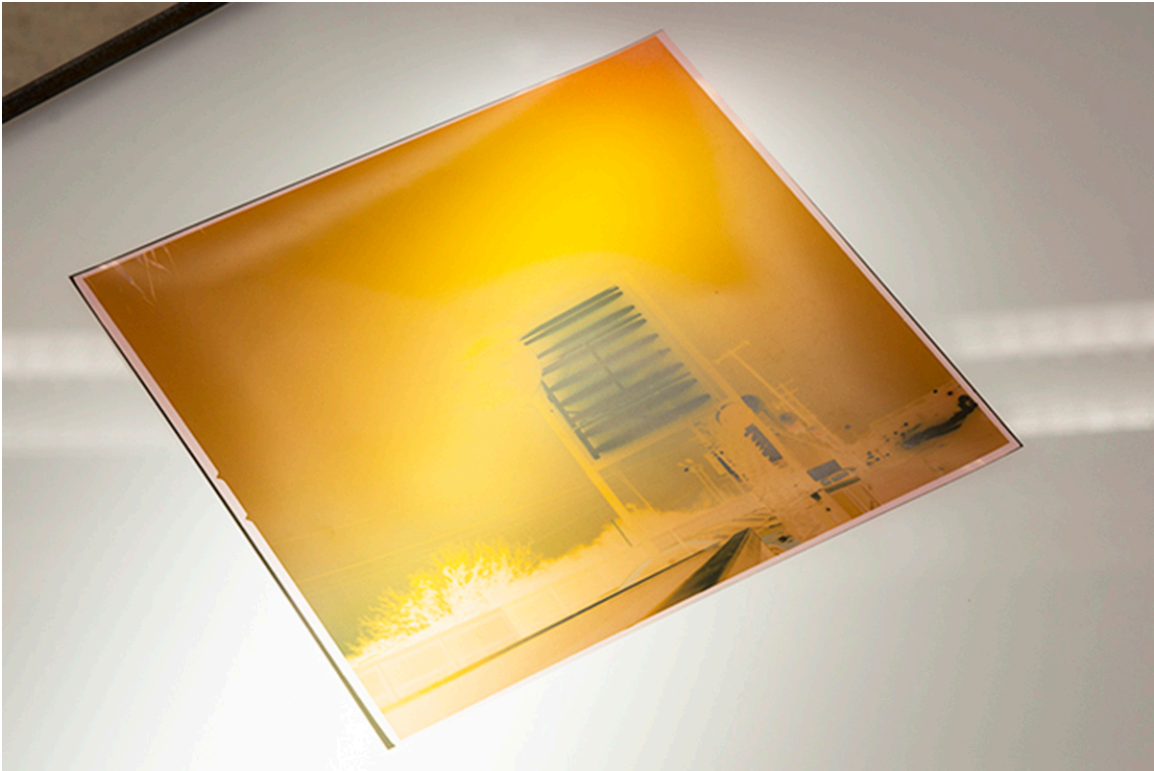


Figure 2. *Airport Boulevard (horizontal)*, detail view, acetate print, acrylic, steel, fluorescent light, 18"x18"x32", 2015

When I found the empty, glowing sign-structure on Airport Boulevard in Austin last spring, it struck me as something beautiful and odd. I began by photographing this structure, exhibiting a negative image in the piece titled *Airport Boulevard (horizontal)* as opposed to a positive. I felt that a traditional photograph lacked what I was attempting to convey. My next response was to construct a facsimile in my studio. I fabricated the steel structure, welded on the tensioning rods; I zip-tied the electric ballasts crudely onto the structural members and set the long fluorescent bulbs in place. I mounted the steel structure as high as I could on my concrete studio wall. And then I made more.

The light that illuminates my studio is emitted from these facsimiles, as exemplified in *Airport Boulevard (vertical)*. They illuminate my daily tasks and my studio production. Through the construction of the facsimiles and their presence in my studio I

began to understand their spatial characteristics and idiosyncrasies. I realized that I wanted to work directly with the original artifacts—in-situ, out in the world.



Figure 3. *Airport Boulevard (vertical)*, steel fluorescent bulbs, ballasts, 72"x10"x49", 2015

While in London in the fall of 14' I spent time in an installation by Pierre Huyghe³. The exhibition included a series of oversized aquariums containing habitats from Monet's ponds in Giverny. The lighting for these aquariums were on a timed sequence, which continually altered the lighting conditions in the gallery but also limited the duration in which a viewer could spend uninterrupted time with the aquarium's content. Darkness can be a crutch, a way to hide faulty craftsmanship or a way to compensate for what isn't there. The darkened condition of the gallery in my exhibition, *Room with a View*, serves as a metonym for the time in which a viewer might experience the strange circumstances of these empty illuminated signs—perhaps at dusk or midnight. It is a time when the landscape, the streetscape, is awash in shadows. As with the night, we see only what is purposefully shown. The artifacts seem to push against this purposefulness, operating on their own rogue terms. My sign-structure facsimiles are constructed out of the same materials as the actual signs; it's no coincidence that the fluorescent bulbs of these signs are the same that illuminate the gallery.

In the idealized contemporary gallery, cool-toned fluorescent bulbs populate the ceiling in grids helping create the even-toned condition of the white cube. In one sense I accumulate this condition into my sculptures, the array of fluorescent fixtures are absorbed into the steel structures cantilevered high off of the gallery wall. But in lieu of a consistent mercurial glow, my bulb selection suggests randomness, faultiness – pink and blue bulbs, some even burned out – as if the bulbs have been pulled from a catchall bin in the back of a maintenance shop. The erratic character of the bulbs reveals a line of thinking: use what I have. (*Figure 4*)

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Huyghe, Pierre. "IN. BORDER. DEEP." London: Hauser and Wirth Gallery, 2014. Exhibition.



Figure 4. Room with a View, Thesis Installation, 2016.



Figure 5. *Relic in Two Parts*, concrete, steel, 23"x56"x31", 2014.

Ed Ruscha tells me: *"Everything you've ever wanted is right in your own backyard."*⁴

Backyard implies the presence of an attached and foregrounded home. My recent work considers home as a subjective, non-contiguous, anachronistic condition. If home is to be experienced as a *"memory palace"*, as a thing experienced in time, through recollection, then opportunities for invention, interpretation, and improvisation

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Mandel, Mike. *Untitled (Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards)*, Ed Ruscha. 1975.

wander appropriately through rational and irrational conditions.

The backyard is a place to dig, to build fires, for the dog to run and to shit. It's a place to mow, to trim, to forget about. It's the plane that slides under the home, on which the home is grounded. In this sense the backyard is a supportive plane. Ruscha speaks about the backyard metaphorically as containing everything one needs: the garden, the fertilizer, the water. It's a misnomer to consider the backyard a vacuum, for there are holes in the fence, holes in the ground, and gates left open. Perhaps the most meaningful of discoveries are exhumed from the holes in our own backyard and whatever strays through those open gates.

"It may seem strange that it is the most marginalized, out-of-the-way places that place seems to matter most while the places lodged firmly in the center of things grow vague and interchangeable."

Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*⁵

This quote by anthropologist Kathleen Stewart seems to emphasize the two strains of my current photographic practice, one lodged at the center with distinct formal characteristics and one at the periphery where form begins to dissolve. The two ways in which I make photographs seem to be anchors along my own gamut of how I experience conditions of place.

Another impact on my investigations into ideas of place comes out of a writing practice in which I explore locations accessible to me only through familial surrogates. These surrogates are primary sources from which I gather, collect, and edit the information I receive, translating it into something of a fabulation—a fluid space of fiction and fabled observation. An important aspect about these writings is that they

⁵

Stewart, Kathleen. *A Space on the Side of the Road*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. Print.

are written ex-situ, outside or away from the locations themselves. This inherent distance contributes to the vestigial nature of these ruminations as forms of longing. This writing practice allows me to construct segments of an anachronistic narrative that are in close proximity to my photographs.

My photographs come out of an ethos of photography as ritual as opposed to reflex. I make each camera that I use and generally I make two types of photographs. One type emerges directly from my appropriation and conversion of empty sign-structures into cameras while the other is of open water conditions in South Louisiana. I find that the first type is anchored in logic, in a set of rules that determine all variables involved while the second type is open, floating at the water's edge.

The sign-structure photographs are typically composed of a strict grid of individual images, resulting in many slightly shifted perspectives of streets, parking lots, and strip malls, they have a complicated or ambivalent relationship to place while the waterscapes are saturated in a specific and poetic connection to place. The open water photographs are made at infrastructural ends where blacktop or gravel meets water. I have been focusing these efforts in the South Louisiana landscape, where land's edge is losing ground. These open water photographs hold image diameters that slightly overlap; the photographs are large in scale opening the viewer to the sublime sense of landscape beyond the levees.

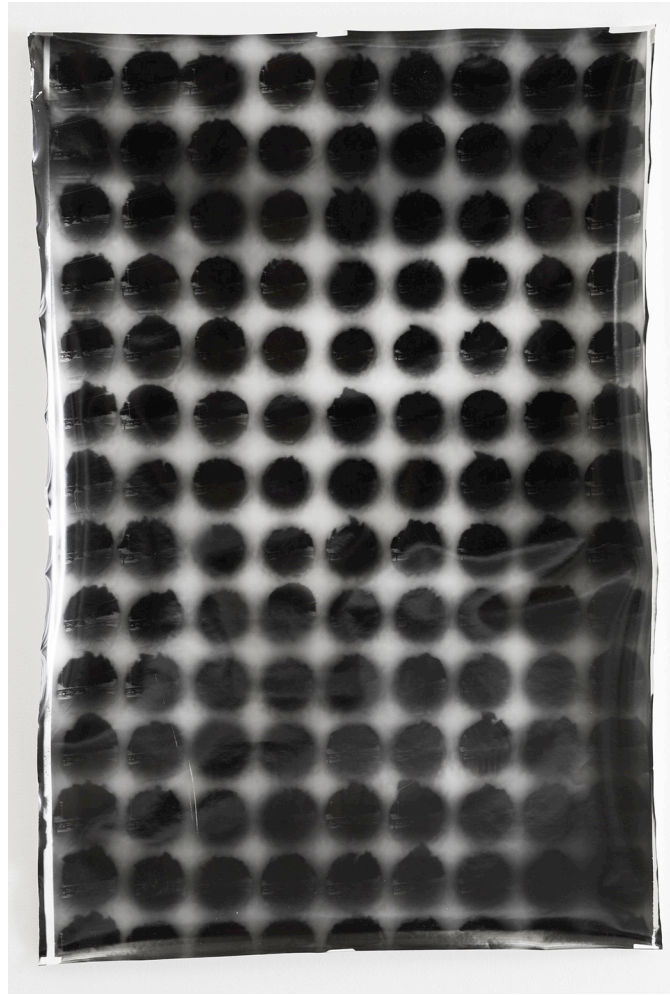


Figure 6. 135 Apertures, gelatin-silver print, 59"x38"x3"

I recently discovered a book of essays titled *Minor Photography, Connecting Deleuze and Guattari to Photography Theory*. In the introduction, Mieke Bleyen sets forth the ambitions of this collection of essays, all of which attempt to adapt Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor from literature to photography⁶. Bleyen quotes Mieke Bal who suggests that applying the theory of the minor requires a

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Bleyen, Mieke. "Introduction." *Minor Photography: Connecting Deleuze and Guattari to Photography Theory*. Ed. Bleyen, Mieke. Leuven University Press, 2012. ix-xviii. Print.

“making travel” of the concept from its roots in literature to its application in photography. In thinking about my previous work, which focused on spaces of transit and transport, I enjoy the strangeness of making a concept “travel” from literature to photography—inflecting a concept with the unexpected that comes with travel keeps it vulnerable and open in its application.

To quote Bleyen on the “transfer” of the concept, “a minor literature deterritorializes the dominant use of language, makes it stutter and stammer. It brings to the fore the intense and affective qualities of language by moving language to the borders of its representational level, towards music or silence. Further, a minor literature is always immediately connected to politics... Rather the politics of the minor is connected to a becoming, a work of demolition which is continuously the building of a new assemblage.”

The empty sign-structures my sculptures reference or from which I produce my photographs are the results of destructive actions, a removal of face and a revealing of bone. Minors are emergent and becoming. A minor usage of a major language—in terms of language or in my application, photography—forces it, as Bleyen points out, towards its margins where it comes closer to “music or silence” or—in my case—towards film or sculpture, opening up the viewer to time-based reads and dimensionality.



Figure 7. *Circulations*, steel, fans, circline fluorescent fixtures, each cylinder 13", 2014.



Figure 8. *In Passing*, glass installed in gallery wall, 17' in length, 2015

Until recently, much of my work dealt with dislocations of place or spaces that are conditioned to reach through and beyond via transit or transport. I had been using the terms 'transit' and 'transport' interchangeably but here I attempt a closer look at the space between these terms as it might better define my position as it pertains to issues of place. In looking back at the past two years of work I have used various metaphors and metonymies to refer to these two terms as I sought ways to materialize psychological and phenomenal states and physical systems. I have begun to understand that these terms have the ability to complicate the relationship between local and global.

My use of 'transit' refers to a physical condition, a vehicle by which locomotion occurs. 'Transport' is a collapse of the physical condition into the perceptual. Most importantly both terms refer to a middle ground of conveyance, of pointing towards the instability of state changes—to be in transition, to utilize a transportation system. My works titled *Circulations* and *In Passing* both reference the characteristics of mobile spaces of transit and transport.



Figure 9. *Elephant & Castle*, Chromogenic Print, 21"x21", 2014.



Figure 10. *345 to South Kensington*, Chromogenic Print, 21"x21", 2014.

I am interested in individualized vantage points from shared spaces of transit. Within these spaces passengers experience their own passing views of the landscape through portals or expanses of glass. My understanding of this experience was heightened while spending time in the double-decker buses of London. With each seat on the bus, train, or plane, the passenger is afforded a slightly shifted perspective of the landscape. This condition of viewing a contiguous landscape through slightly shifted portals within a shared space is something that I desire to achieve in my photographs.

Much like a row of passengers peering through a bus window the cameras that I construct contain rows and columns of apertures. Each of these slightly shifted apertures reveals their own vantage point, indexing details that are slightly different from the adjacent apertures. The resultant photographs contain seemingly repeated images represented within a grid of separate coronas of information (insert image examples). The photographs set up a viewing experience where the photograph can be held by multiple viewers taking in multiple and slightly shifted views of the subject in front of them, that was once in front of the camera. The viewers inhabit the previous space of the camera, the previous embodiment of the space of the defunct space-frame of the sign.



Figure 11. 18 Apertures, gelatin-silver print, 37"x82"x2", 2015

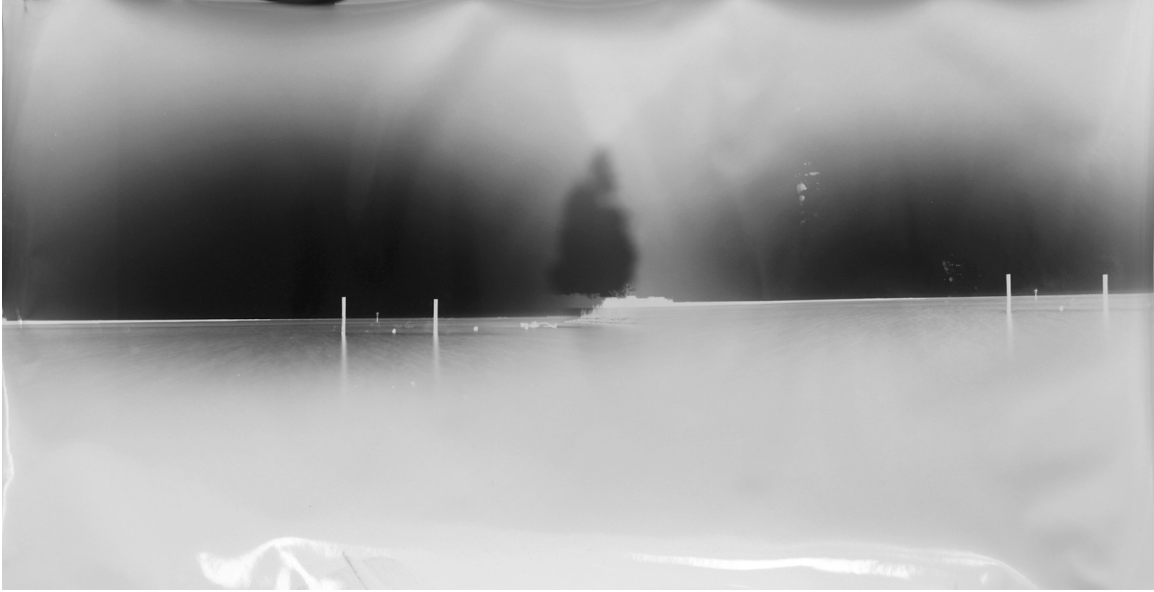


Figure 12. Open Water, Lake St. Catherine, gelatin-silver print, 30"x60"x2"

I am calling attention to the apparatus in the same way a minor utilizes (from within) the major, inflecting it, absorbing and manipulating it. When the sign-structures lose their subjects—their information panels—they become infrastructural relics operating against original intentions. Instead of signifying points of commerce through a sign as metaphor, they signify—through metonymy—the very antithesis of a functioning capitalist economy summed up in terms of stagnation, ends, lack, and ultimately, ruin. There is an untethering of the literal sign structures from the commercial buildings to which they were previously attached. They become individually autonomous within a post-commercial taxonomy.

Andre Bazin's quote that photography "embalms time" correlates to straight photography's connotations of being "slices of time, transparent windows on reality, and objective representations" (Bleyen)—all of which have had their place in girding up our traditional understanding of major photography. In this thought, in which Deleuze suggests the idea of embalming time or making still as a 'mould of time', is the point of departure for my own work.

In his essay, *The Eclipse of Time*, Victor Burgin discusses two conditions of time⁷. As I have stated previously I would like for my photographs to push the medium of photography towards its margins where it might butt up against sculpture or film. By looking at conditions of time in film through Victor Burgin's essay I have found a way to think about the reading of my work. "A film has both a diatetic time and a running time, which is usually the time of its viewing; a photograph has only the time of its viewing." In the case of my work I find this statement problematic, with my photographs there exists both a diatetic time and a running time. The individual images that make up one of my photographs gather aspects of a context in relation to place but also duration.

Through multiplicity and a revealing of (line of flight from) the mechanism, the resultant image opens up what Vilem Flusser refers to as the impenetrability (or unhackability) of the camera as 'black box'. My photographs open up this black box condition by providing clues as to the conditions of input and output by recording information native to the particular photographic process employed. By constructing my own cameras I work from a beginning point of complete transparency in that the camera body itself begins as a basic kit of parts determined by my own design. Having an intimate knowledge of the inner-workings and nuance of my cameras allows me to

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Burgin, Victor. "The Eclipse of Time." *Time and Photography*. Eds. Baetens, Jan, Streitberger, Alexander, and Van Gelder, Hilde. Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2010. 125-140. Print.

tweak the entire mechanism—from the inside-out—to achieve the images I desire. My photographs are a result of, and result in, a manifold of indexes including those of place and of the mechanism. An 'opening up' includes the opening up of time, or more appropriately duration, through multiplicity (of apertures, of images) and the particular black box aspects of the mechanism.

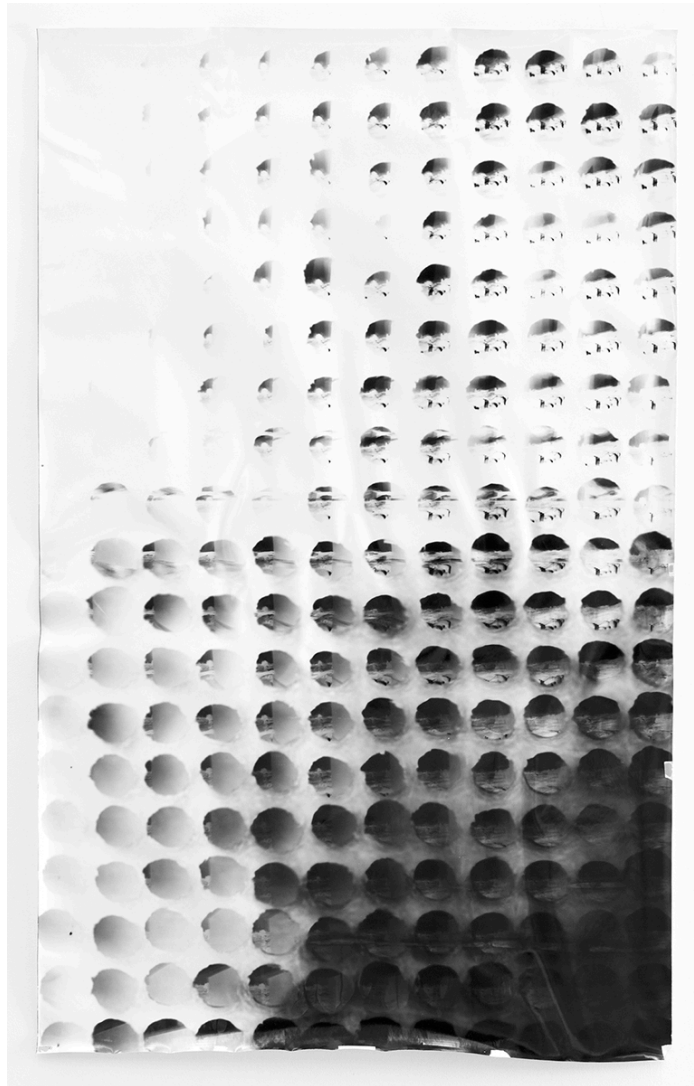


Figure 13. 240 Apertures, gelatin-silver print, 97"x57"x2"

My photographs speak of time and duration; their relation to time-based media such as film is clear. At the same time, my images complicate a viewer's reading of the place recorded. Threaded together, my images point toward a knowledge beyond that divined by looking into latent states of looking, those of memory, including historic representations and the inherent problems of taking image as fact. Traditional straight photography is interested in the single view, the decisive moment captured by the photographer as lone agent. The underlying power of this decisive moment, of freezing what has never been experienced and what will never be experienced again, the "always-already" that Burgin speaks of, is compromised in my photographs by a populous creation and a consumption of image as reflex. In my work I photograph much like I make a sculpture, I deal with objects in space that refer to or collect information beyond themselves and beyond my own agency as an artist.

By working both centrifugally and centripetally, moving from the urban—out and the rural—in, my work remains in flux, continually disassembling notions of boundary and threshold. I would like to continue formulating my work at the boundaries of media—where sculpture, photography, and time-based works coalesce.



Figure 14. Uninvited Stranger, steel, red light bulb, cord, 80"x39"x17", 2016

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